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CURRENT SUPPORT BRIEF

CROP PRODUCTION IN COMMUNIST CHINA IN 1960

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OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND REPORTS

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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The Assistant Chief of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of Communist China, Fang Fang, is reported to have said in a speech [redacted]

[redacted] that severe natural calamities in 1960 had affected the crops on one-half of China's cultivated fields. He further stated that the total harvest (presumably grain) in 1960 would be about 200 million tons. 1/

Fang's estimate of the total grain crop is the only known quantitative estimate of the 1960 crop made by a Chinese Communist official.* A Reuters correspondent in Peiping reported on 15 November 1960 that the American reporter Edgar Snow was told by Chou En-lai that natural disasters in 1960 were China's worst in the 20th century and that the 1960 grain crop, while topping 1957, would be lower than 1958 and 1959. 2/ The Chinese claims for grain production are 185 million tons in 1957, 250 million tons in 1958, and 270 million tons in 1959.** According to Chou's statement, there is a 65 million ton spread within which the official 1960 grain estimate can be set; however, Chou's reference to the 1957 output would have been gratuitous were not the 1960 claim to be drastically below that in 1959. Support for a figure even lower than Fang's forecast appeared in the 4 January 1961 edition of the official Polish government newspaper Trybuna Ludu, where in a discussion of natural disasters in China it was stated that "as a result, crops dropped to the 1957 level." 3/ The goal for 1960 was 297 million tons [redacted]

ORR estimates 1958 and 1959 grain crops to have been around 212 and 190 million tons respectively. It is not clear whether the harvests of the "leap forward" years of 1958 and 1959 were deliberately exaggerated by the central authorities. Overenthusiastic cadres, in an attempt to outdo one another in overfulfilling production quotas, exaggerated actual accomplishments; at the same time, state statistical organizations were encouraged to publish agricultural data which were politically favorable to the Party line, at the expense of statistical objectivity. It was probably the chaotic effects of such reporting on economic planning that caused the government in August 1959 to change the 1958 grain claim from its original 375 million tons to 250 million tons. The output planned for 1959 was at that time reduced from 525 million tons to 275 million tons. 4/ The regime has probably found it difficult to reconcile its claims for production in 1958 and 1959 with the food shortages reported throughout the country during 1959 and 1960. Were the official claims for 1958 and 1959 actually achieved, there would have been no shortage of grain.

During most of the 1960 growing season, the Chinese claimed that various natural calamities were adversely affecting agricultural prospects. In July 1960, a People's Daily editorial commented on the drought and stated that a great victory would be scored on the agricultural front even if the amount of grain harvested during the summer

* The text of the communique on the 9th plenary session of the Party Central Committee held 14-18 January 1961 did not contain any agricultural production figures although a report on the 1960 plan fulfillment report was presented at the session.

** All these figures include potatoes on the basis of 4 tons of potatoes equal to 1 ton of grain.

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were "equal to, higher, or slightly lower than that of 1959." 5/ In August 1960 the area affected by calamities was said to total 40 million hectares, 6/ while by October 1960 it had reportedly increased to 60 million hectares because of "the most serious natural calamities since the founding of the People's Republic." 7/ Beginning in late December 1960, Chinese press releases stated that the calamities were the worst in 100 years. 8/ These inter-year comparisons of area affected by calamities are not very useful, because the criteria used to describe "calamity" are not clearly defined and can be changed by the regime to suit their immediate purposes.

Although 1960 was unquestionably a year of severe natural disasters in many areas of mainland China, the Chinese reports appear to exaggerate the severity. Weather information and soil moisture estimates from US government sources indicate that much of China was affected by drought in 1960, especially the major wheat growing areas in North China. Rainfall in other areas, however, was about the same as last year. It is unlikely that drought did much more damage in 1960 than in 1959, which the Chinese now admit was also a poor crop year, although they claimed a record grain harvest of 270 million tons. It is believed therefore that the regime is deliberately exaggerating the damage from poor weather in 1960 in order to prepare the way for a return to more realistic agricultural statistics, absolve itself and its policies from any blame for the situation which has developed, and justify the harshness of its rationing program. (ORR estimates that total grain output in 1960 was again about 190 million tons. [redacted])

25X1 The seriousness of such a deficit in agricultural production, however --a harvest below that in 1958 and probably about the same as in 1959 with some 30,000,000 more mouths to feed this year than in 1958--is reflected in the increasing number of reports of serious food shortages during the latter part of 1960. [redacted]

25X1 [redacted] the food shortage is acute and probably not yet at its most severe. [redacted] for the first time since 1949 something approaching famine threatens parts of the country. 9/ Other reports from the mainland speak of famine conditions, an increase in nutritional diseases, and reductions in grain rations. There is said to be a high incidence of beri-beri (a condition of painful neuritis caused by a lack of vitamin B₁) among university students in Peiping and Tientsin, and a campaign to reduce physical activity has been initiated. 10/ Another report reveals that the grain ration in Peiping was reduced on 1 November 1960. A ration of 32.5 catties, for example, was reduced to 28 catties a month, with the average reduction estimated at 20 percent. The reduction effected in Peiping on 1 November is said to have started in other parts of China in August. 11/ The harshness of the regime's rationing system has led to increasing disgruntlement among the population, and open demonstrations against the regime in some instances.

25X1 To alleviate this worsening food situation, Peiping has recently purchased sizeable quantities of grain from Australia, Canada and Burma. Negotiations now underway will bring total grain import commitments for 1961 to almost 2,500,000 tons, which will cost China close to US\$ 200,000,000 in foreign exchange. An expenditure of this size, which will necessitate a readjustment in China's pattern of foreign trade--more specifically a cutback in other imports and probably further drains on an already precarious foreign exchange position--attests both to the seriousness of the present food situation and to the very real concern it is causing the regime. At the same time, however, China is continuing to export grain. Known commitments for 1961 to Albania, Ceylon and Cuba total almost 500,000 tons, and exports to the rest of the Bloc, while not known, may approach or even exceed this amount.

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There seems little doubt that food reserves on the mainland are extremely tight, and the situation may become critical before the first harvest in the summer of 1961. The regime has served notice that rations will be meager this winter and, in addition to the strictest controls on consumption, has taken steps to lessen the work load of the peasants during this period. It is believed that these controls on consumption which will stretch available supplies as far as they can conceivably go, the easing of the work load during the winter, and imports of grain to augment domestic availabilities will suffice to carry the population through the winter.

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